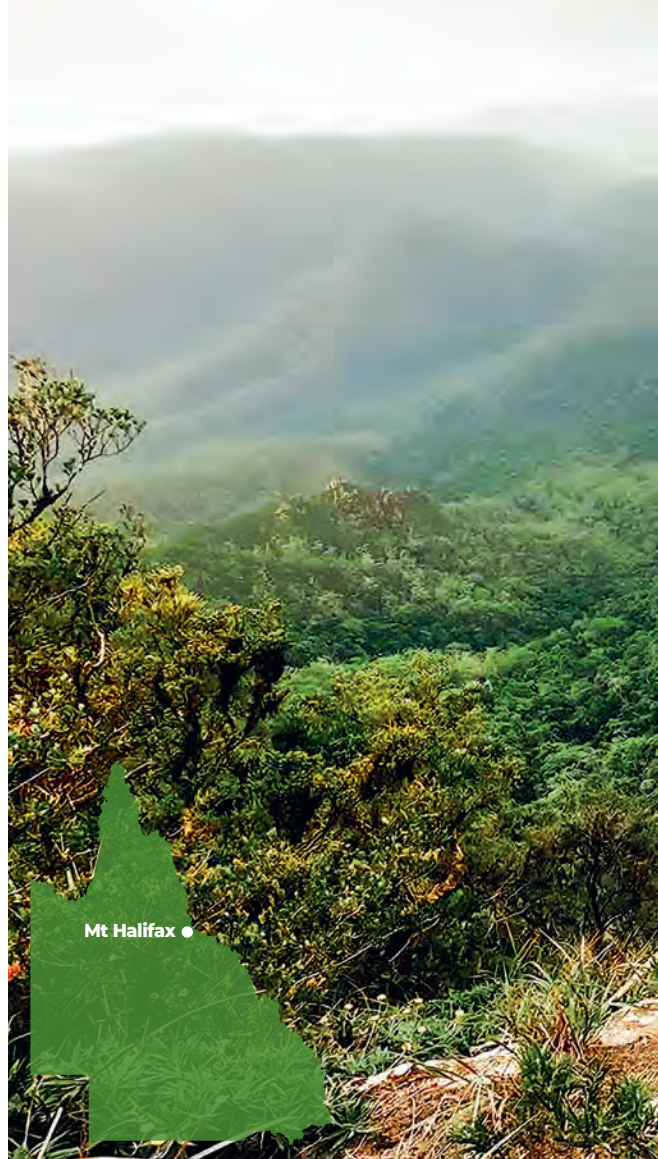


THREE ROUTES UP QUEENSLAND'S MT HALIFAX

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Photography *Madoc Sheehan, Luke Warneke & Adrian Garnett*



MT HALIFAX IS A 1,063M PEAK in the Paluma Range National Park, just a 35min drive north of Townsville. Although not well known around the country, it's a local gem, one of the tallest mountains in the southern section of the coastal range, and is a premier walking destination for the people of North Queensland.

Mt Halifax is an adventurer's playground, beloved by the outdoors community here for its swimming holes, for its beautiful ridge and creek walks, and for its broad range of vegetation types: Dry vine-thicket and dry eucalypt ecosystems down low; grass-tree and she-oak dominated ridgelines; and superb cloud forest covering the summit plateau in a delicious green cloak of moss and ferns.

Despite there being a number of alternate routes to the summit, all tracks and routes start from sea level and ascend very steep ridgelines, resulting in tough, knee-intensive slogs no matter what route you choose. Being in the wet tropics, summitting can be a very hot and sweaty exercise at any time of the year; interestingly, Mt Halifax is commonly used as a training ground for those planning to walk the Kokoda Track.

Although best done in the cooler, drier months, even in summer Mt Halifax has good walking options, including some fabulous and well-loved swimming holes and small waterfalls on the lower-altitude creeks. These provide shorter and easier access, and offer local hikers and families welcome relief from the heat and humidity. But Mt Halifax shouldn't be the preserve of locals alone; it's time this secret was shared with the rest of Australia.

QUICK FACTS

Activity: Short, full-day and overnight hiking

Location: Paluma Range NP & Clemant SF, QLD

When to go: Not summer, unless you're swimming

Distances: 2 - 30km

Duration: 2 hours - 3 days

Difficulty: Easy to very difficult

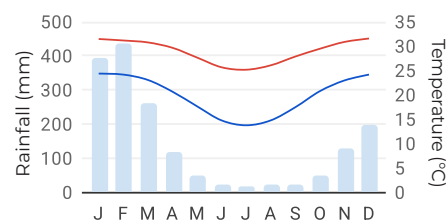
Permits required: QPWS remote-camping permit required for overnight trips; parks.desi.qld.gov.au/camping

Fees: None for daywalks; QPWS camping fees apply for overnight walks - \$7.25 pp/night

More info: wanderstories.space

Note: There are no BoM stations on Mt Halifax. The stations chosen are close geographically, but may considerably understate rainfall and temps.

RAINFALL: ROLLINGSTONE
TEMPERATURES: TOWNSVILLE AERO





Surveying Godwin's Peak from the summit of Mt Halifax



Main falls, Turtle Creek



Cloud forest, summit plateau

HISTORY

The Nawagi, Wulgurukaba and Gudjal Peoples all had some association with this part of the world, but art sites in the rainforest are rare, and it appears the Seaview and Paluma Ranges were not permanently occupied. However, many historical Aboriginal paths go from the coastal lowlands up over the range to the drier country out west, and such paths, including Bullocky Tom's Track and Foxlee's Track, were used by early tin miners, loggers and settlers; they now form the backbone of an extensive walking-track network throughout the Paluma Range. However, no logging or mining activity occurred on Mt Halifax itself, and the forested summit remains an enclave of old-growth magnificence. Mt Halifax and its surrounds were inscribed in 1988 as part of the World Heritage-listed Wet Tropics rainforest, preserving these natural treasures for future generations to enjoy.

Although there is evidence of early efforts to blaze a track up Halifax, the first known track to the summit was opened in 2006 by a local group, led by Trevor Cheeseman, known as the Spartan Trekkers. The frequency of the features named by the group (eg Camps 1, 2 and 3) on the now-main track to the summit illustrate the mighty effort required to forge new tracks through the rainforest. An alternative summit route, via Godwin's Peak, was also opened by the Spartan Trekkers in 2017, another mammoth undertaking. Other untracked summit routes, such as the North West Ridge and Turtle Creek, were opened by myself and friends in 2018 and 2019 respectively. Information and track notes for these and many other fantastic North Queensland walking adventures can be found on the website: wanderstories.space

FLORA & FAUNA

Mt Halifax has diverse vegetation. At lower altitudes, you'll find dry vine thicket and dry-eucalypt ecosystems with an assortment of fabulous fig trees. As you climb, you'll pass through grass-tree- and she-oak-dominated ridgelines, before entering exquisite cloud forest on the summit plateau. There are turtles and yabbies in the creeks, snakes (both harmless and dangerous) and an abundance of small marsupials and rodents (for the snakes to eat). If you are very lucky, you might even spot a cassowary.

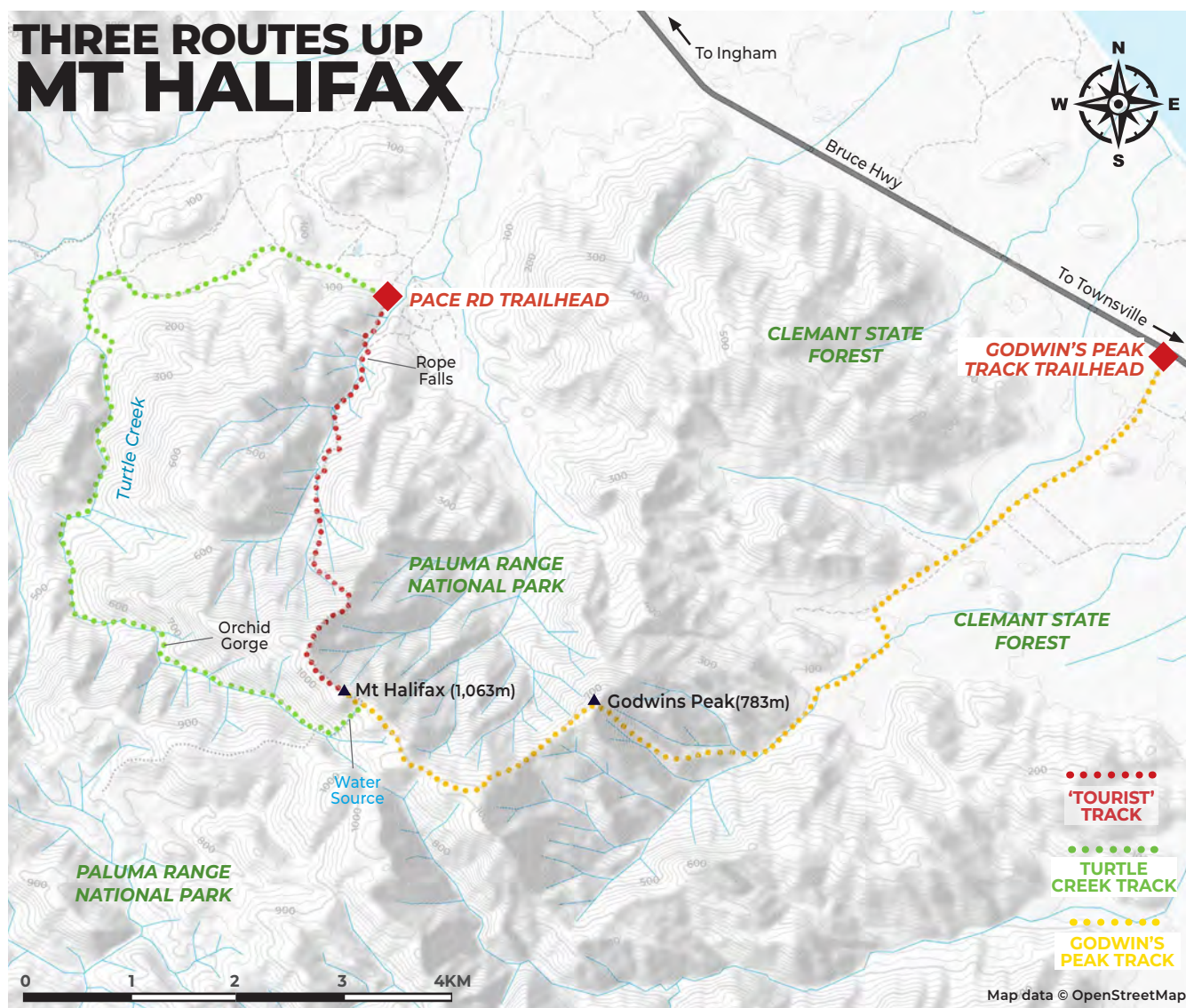
WHEN TO GO

Short walks to Gorge, Rope and Loop Falls are easily done at any time of year. Summer allows for enjoyable swimming, and the creeks will be running well after the wet season. Longer full-day and overnight walks that summit Godwin's Peak or Mt Halifax are best done during the cooler months (May to September). Turtle Creek should only be attempted during the dry season and within fine weather windows (September to November).

GETTING THERE & LOGISTICS

From Townsville, drive 40km north on the Bruce Highway toward Rollingstone. For the Tourist Route to Mt Halifax, and the Turtle Creek, Gorge/Rope and Loop Falls routes, turn left at the Pace Farm just before Rollingstone Bridge, and park beside the gate at the end of Pace Rd. For the Godwin's Peak Trail, approximately 10km before Rollingstone, park beside the entrance gate to the Clemant State Forest. This is on your left, adjacent to the Bruce Highway, 500m north of the Toomulla Beach turnoff.

THREE ROUTES UP MT HALIFAX



WATER

During the late dry season (Sept-Dec), the smaller creeks and falls tend to dry up. However, all major creeks on the Godwin's, Mt Halifax and Turtle Creek routes retain flow (or have pools) year-round. But fill your water bottles before you start ascending ridges, and in summer, carry large quantities of water for both the Godwin's Peak and Mt Halifax routes. There is a reliable, well-signed water source thirty minutes past Mt Halifax's summit.

DIFFICULTY

Walking-route difficulties vary greatly here, ranging from easy-ish walks to swimming holes (eg Gorge Falls and Rope Falls) requiring low-to-moderate fitness (albeit needing a passing familiarity with rock hopping) to difficult and strenuous walks to the major summits. Godwin's Peak is less frequently visited than Mt Halifax, with more challenging track conditions. The full Turtle Creek ascent has difficult scrambling and route finding; only attempt it if you're fit and highly capable. However, descending Turtle Creek to Orchid Gorge and returning to Halifax's summit is less technical than the creek's lower sections, and requires only moderate fitness and good rock-hopping skills.

EQUIPMENT & NAVIGATION

A set of good gloves (and secateurs) can really help when walking in North Queensland; they can be useful for hauling yourself up

ropes, and also for pushing away clingy vines, particularly lawyer cane, and stinging trees. There is no reliable mobile-phone coverage on this walk. The usual safety and navigational equipment is necessary, including snake bandages and insect repellent. A short rope can come in handy for the Turtle Creek ascent.

OTHER SUMMIT ROUTES AND TYPE II FUN

Aside from the three main options soon to be described, there are other off-track routes up Mt Halifax. However, unless you're a glutton for punishment, or prepared to do serious track-work, none are recommended. For example, in 2018 I ascended the North West Ridge with Andrew Samuel one gruelling summer's day. Here are some snippets from what I wrote about that ascent:

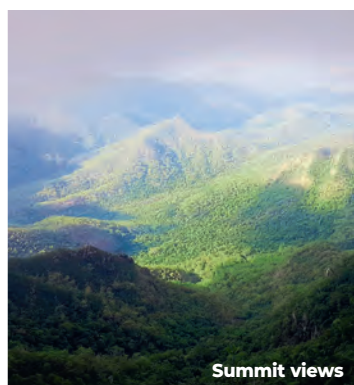
We left the creek with plenty of optimism ... However, our smiles were not to last. Twisted logs were covered over by dense chest-high sword grass and entwined with tangled and scratchy vines. Each step forward, sideways, backwards, and each tumble down into the ankle-snapping log jams sapped what remained of our dwindling energy and enthusiasm.

In one spot we were forced to swim through head-high ferns ... backstroke [proved] better than freestyle. In the dark and 10 hours after leaving the car, we stumbled, parched, heavily scratched and exhausted, back onto the tourist route.

Years later I look back fondly on the experience ... But the desire to do that ridge again is unlikely to ever return.



Fig tree splendour



Summit views

Gorge-ous
Turtle Creek

Summit campsite

THE MAIN OPTIONS

OPTION A

The 'Tourist' Track

LOOP FALLS: 2.5km return; approx 2.5 hours; easy

SUMMIT: 10.5km return; approx 8 hours; moderate-difficult

After driving through fields of pineapples, the Main or 'Tourist' Track starts at the Pace Farm gate. There's a snake-filled log-book-storage box here, and you might pick up an extra walker—'Dutch' the local border collie, who's climbed the peak more than anyone else. The track is well marked with reflective arrows and is easy going at first. In the first hour or so, you'll make numerous crossings of Rollingstone Creek, each time tempted by fantastic swimming holes such as Gorge Falls, Rope Falls, or the peaceful and rarely visited Loop Falls. As an aside, Loop Falls alone is a great 2.5-hour-return walk from the car park (return via the track, or scramble and rock-hop straight back down the creek).

After Loop Falls, the track gets more serious, with a steep rock-hop up dry creek beds to Flat Rock, a perfect spot for morning tea and, unless it's really dry, a good spot to refill water bottles. Soon after Flat Rock, the track gets even steeper, with a few hand-over-hand rope assists and some moderate scrambling. Part-way up to the main ridgeline, there's a short side trip to Bridal Falls, but it's not a reliable water source unless there's been recent rain.

After a few hours of hard yakka, you'll reach the main razor-back ridgeline and emerge onto Echo Hill (894m asl), the start of the incredible views. From here, it's only another hour to the summit, which has beautiful rainforest but can often be clouded in mist. Pick a clear day to maximise your chances of a great view, which stretch all the way to Hinchinbrook Island. All up, the return trip is a full-day hike, typically taking up to eight hours to complete. Unless, that is, you are super fit, in which case you can try to beat the ascent and descent FKTs (currently held by Mitch Nissen at 1hr:10mins and 2hrs:14mins respectively.)

There's a small and picturesque campsite just past the summit, and reliable water can be obtained from a creek another half an hour further on (the way is well marked). Be aware that, despite this being the tropics, at over 1,000m asl, the summit can still be cold and wet, and temps can drop to freezing if you pick a particularly chilly night. You'll still get phone reception at the summit, and watching the sunrise from the campsite or its adjacent lookout is truly a joy to behold. There are plenty of beasties that make their homes in the summit rainforest, so make sure to hang your food if you're camping overnight. The local rodents can be ravenous and have been known to chew through just about anything, including fuel bottles and backpacks.

OPTION B

Godwin's Peak Track

GODWIN'S PEAK: 16km return; approx 7-8 hours; difficult

HALIFAX SUMMIT VIA GODWIN'S PEAK: 17km one-way; approx 8-10 hours; difficult

Godwin's Peak Track offers an alternative but longer route to the summit. Starting in Clemant State Forest, it ascends Halifax via Godwin's Peak, the distinctive bald peak to the east. This is another great track, with fantastic swimming holes, but even though it's flagged, it is less distinct than the main Tourist Track, and would be difficult to complete as a Halifax summit return trip on the same day; it's a terrific day walk just to Godwin's Peak and back. But the track works well as an overnighter, staying at Mt Halifax's summit and returning the same way, or descending via the Tourist Track (with a car swap). Stocking up on water before you leave the main creek at the base of the range is necessary, as there's limited water once you start ridge-climbing up to Godwin's Peak. In fact, the next reliable water source is on a side track near Mt Halifax's summit (4-6 hours away).

Using the Godwins Peak Track enables longer multi-day trips without retracing your steps. One particularly enjoyable option is to spend two nights camping at Halifax's summit, spending the middle day doing a day trip to the spectacular waterfalls and swimming holes of the remote and rugged Upper Turtle Creek, which drains the western slopes of the peak.

**IMAGES - CLOCKWISE
FROM LEFT**

Rock-hopping past Roli
Falls into Turtle Creek

Track markers through the
summit rainforest

Rope Falls on the 'Tourist'
Track offers great
swimming



OPTION C

Turtle Creek Routes

SUMMIT VIA TURTLE CREEK: 12km one-way; approx 12-14 hours; very difficult

SUMMIT TO ORCHID GORGE: approx 6 hours; moderate

Turtle Creek can also be used as another Mt Halifax ascent or descent route, or its top reaches can be explored as a side day trip starting from the summit. As an ascent or descent route, Turtle Creek is a rugged and unflagged option involving tricky scrambling and route finding, and it's best done over two days. Accessing the creek from the Pace Farm gate requires careful navigation to stay inside the national-park boundary. There are a number of spectacular swimming holes, gorges and waterfalls in this creek, including the impressive 30m-high Turtle Falls and the wonderful Orchid Gorge. If walking over two days, there is a small campsite on the western side of Turtle Creek at approximately 450m elevation. This spot is located half an hour downstream of the main falls, and is about 20m above the creek where there is a nice flat rock section with a skinny, deep pool, just upstream of an extremely steep section with massive chockstone boulders and a spectacular swimming hole.

Alternatively, Orchid Gorge and the gorgeous, densely rainforested upper parts of Turtle Creek can also be accessed from the summit by first descending via the flagged track to the water point thirty minutes SW of Halifax's summit, then continuing on this track past Roli Falls and into Turtle Creek. Turtle Creek can then be descended by rock-hopping all the way to Orchid Gorge and back, which is a six-hour-return day trip. If you can tear yourself away from the swimming and relaxing in Orchid Gorge, it's about an hour further down Turtle Creek to reach the main falls. Like most shady North Queensland creeks, Turtle Creek rock hopping is best attempted when it's nice and dry (a slip or accident in such a remote location would be very challenging to manage).

THE FUTURE

There have been many track proposals for the Paluma Range NP and the coastal ranges that include Mt Halifax. The most recent government-sanctioned proposal has been for a multi-day glamping track from Paluma Dam to Wallaman Falls. Although any government investment in North Queensland national parks is refreshing and welcomed, this track proposal has been largely devoid of input from local bushwalkers, and the first iteration of its business case has some seriously heroic assumptions that cast doubts on its viability. Great bushwalks across the world are nearly always developed by the bushwalking community, and they revolve around the linking of outstanding natural attractions and features that are already well recognised. Except for the end point, such features are largely absent from this proposal.

An alternative, complementary, community-driven walk proposal is to complete the existing 55km Paluma-Rollingstone-Bluewater Track (aka the PRB Track) to link Paluma Village with the Bluewater Range via Mt Halifax and the upper reaches of Rollingstone Creek. Side trips off the PRB Track would include the summits of Mt Halifax and Circle View Mountain, as well as the magnificent Circle View Falls. The PRB Track has been fifteen years in the making; only a short 10km section remains to be completed. Hopefully in the near future, a massive trail network spanning over 100km will open up numerous multi-day walking opportunities, enabling a rewarding, intimate and personal appreciation of this magnificent and wild part of the world. Until then, the joys of wandering Mt Halifax's cloud forests and swimming in its beautiful creeks will have to suffice, and that's fine by me. **W**

CONTRIBUTOR: Madoc is an NQ-based adventure junkie—highly proficient in blending bushwalking, climbing, paddling and riding with injuries, heat stroke and assaults by deadly plants and animals.

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